**Labor Organization During the Gilded Age**

Excerpted from: *Death in the Haymarket* by James Green

Leading Illinois Republicans who gathered at Lincoln's grave on May 4, 1865, rejoiced that free labor had triumphed over the slave system in that great war now won. They believed a new nation had emerged from the bloody conflict, new because now all of its people were "wholly free." The 4 million bondsmen the "martyred emancipator" had liberated were, said the Tribune, a living epistle to Lincoln's immortality. But were all the people now wholly free?

IN THE YEARS after Lincoln's death, emancipated slaves found many compelling reasons to question the meaning of their new freedom in the face of the reign of white terror that descended upon them. At the same time, for quite different reasons, workingmen, the very mechanics who benefited most from the free labor system Lincoln had extolled, began to doubt the nature of their liberty. A few months before the war ended, the nation's most influential trade union leader, William H. Sylvis, came to Chicago and sounded an alarm that echoed in many labor newspapers in the closing months of the war. The president of the powerful Iron Molders' International Union excoriated employers who took advantage of the war emergency to fatten their profits while keeping their employees on lean wages. When union workers protested with strikes, politicians called them traitors, soldiers drove them back to work, and many loyal union men were fired and blacklisted by their bosses in retaliation. How, Sylvis asked, could a republic at war with the principle of slavery make it a felony for a workingman to exercise his right to protest, a right President Lincoln had once celebrated as the emblem of free labor? "What would it profit us, as a nation," the labor leader wondered, if the Union and its Constitution were preserved but essential republican principles were violated? If the "greasy mechanics and horny-handed sons of toil" who elected Abe Lincoln became slaves to work instead of self-educated citizens and producers, what would become of the Republic?

**Focus Question:**

* How did labor responded to the growing power of corporations and to what extent were they effective?

**Directions:** Gather information from the below sources and answer the focus question.

* NPR: Haymarket Remembered
* James Green excerpt above
* Assigned Strike
* Assigned Union goals and Constitutions